

They Don't Have to Win Nationals: The Benefits of Forensics to Parents, Communities, and Society



As anyone who participates in forensics understands, our activity generates myriad positive effects for all who participate. In fact, the so abundant are the benefits of forensics that one article could not contain them all. This article is the first installment of a 3-part series which explains the benefits of forensics to students, educators/ administrators, and communities.

By Jennifer Billman

The benefits of forensics move outward from the student competitor like a ripple effect, ultimately changing their families, communities, and societies. Parents often discover that their students are more emotionally mature and independent than their counterparts. Community members observe that students who participate in speech and debate are far more likely to take active steps to improve their communities through political involvement and social engagement. Finally, improvements in forensic students' productivity affect the entire community; to borrow a popular political metaphor, a rising tide carries many ships. The NFL plays a vital role in each of these phenomena, improving the lives of a vast audience every time it inducts a new member.

Forensics encourages emotional maturity and conflict-resolution skills.

In an era when extracurricular activities seem to endlessly clamor for a son or daughter's attention, many parents have trouble deciding which afterschool activities are worth their time, energy, and resources. Fortunately, the evidence comes down unequivocally on the side of one extracurricular activity – debate and speech. Parents are often convinced of the importance of forensics in their

child's life by the impact it has on his or her academic success – higher test scores, higher grades, and more scholarship opportunities (Minch, 2006). They may also want to help their child gain admission to a top-tier school; an objective with which forensics can help (Luong, 2001). However, they may also encourage their child's participation for social or emotional reasons. Children who compete in forensics are more likely to demonstrate emotional maturity, particularly in the face of adversity (Carr, 2002). They are also more likely to develop strong relationships with peers and mentors, all of which can help them endure the rocky teen years (Fine, 2001). In summation, "Debate instills in teenagers to skills necessary to be competent adults (Carr, 2002, p. 26).

Research indicating emotional and social benefits of forensic participation suggests that forensics can also help students to be more cooperative and mature members of families and other groups. Bellon explained that, "above all, debate teaches students to understand how others think – even those others with whom they strongly disagree" (166). This ability translates into improved conflict resolution skills which students can use personally and professionally. Moreover, improved conflict resolution skills enable debate students to resolve their problems

without lashing out. In fact, studies have affirmed that communication competence can reduce verbal aggression in instances of conflict, thereby reducing one of the more common precursors to physical aggression (Infante & Wigley, 1986).

Families are not the only ones affected by speech teams: Forensic competitors tend to demonstrate strong loyalty to their parent program and former school (Minch, 2006). Many attorneys and other professionals return to coach their former programs, even if only part time; others become parents and encourage their child's participation or contribute financially to their alma mater (Billman & Christensen, 2008). Both temporal and financial contributions are increasingly important as the economy stagnates. As Minch explains, "quite importantly for schools in a period of fiscal uncertainty, participation in such programs translates into a supportive community, good citizens, and future parents (2006, p. 9).

Forensics encourages civic engagement and political participation.

One of the most significant arguments for forensic education stems from the increases of social engagement that accompany debate and speech training. Forensics teaches students to be familiar with current events (Colbert & Biggers,

1985). Equally importantly, it helps students feel comfortable with unfamiliar language and concepts, as Tucker and Phillips explain: “Debate provides experiences that prove to students that they should not be intimidated by the rhetoric of expertise that surrounds decision-making in our society, thereby connecting them to public life and the responsibilities of citizenship” (2002, p. 17). Through careful research and presentation, speech and debate competitors learn to evaluate social theory, current events, and more, a process which encourages them to participate. As Carr explained, “The sooner you learn about the philosophies and events which define our world, the sooner you can apply yourself as a policymaker” (2002, p. 26)

Forensics also breaks down barriers to civic engagement. For example, Bellon (2000) found that debate leveled the playing field for women by teaching them to be assertive, thus more effectively able to voice their concerns in a world of men. Prominent minority figures from Malcolm X to Oprah have also found their voice in forensics. Intuitively, since forensics increases education, the great equalizer, underrepresented groups should gain empowerment from the activity. These diverse voices, heretofore underrepresented, contribute powerfully to discussions both in and out of forensic rounds. By beginning a dialogue about important issues at a forensic tournament, competitors can raise awareness of community and societal problems, drawing attention to issues so that they may be addressed before they reach critical mass. They can also use skills honed at tournaments after the competition subsides.

While opinionated, forensic students are also empathetic. This means that not only are they more likely to know about social problems, they are more likely to do something about them. For all of these reasons, forensic students are more likely to be the ones on the front lines of pivotal

issues (Bellon, 2000). In fact, a number of forensic teams require community service as a prerequisite to competition. Some projects are simple acts of service, such as cleaning out the fleet of busses in the school transportation lot (Russell, 2007). In other cases, teams might “adopt” a certain social cause. In either case, forensic students have a unique opportunity to serve because of their developed social skills, and many forensic coaches and educators are ensuring that



Photo: Martin Note

team members through organized service opportunities.

Forensics yields higher productivity and quality of life.

Compared to the general population, former forensic students are disproportionately likely to become leaders (Colbert & Biggers, 1985). Competitive speech and debate gives students the opportunity to develop skills that are especially helpful to leaders such as listening skills, tact, and clarity. Additionally, forensics tends to increase students’ self confidence (Fine, 2001), potentially rendering them more comfortable in a leadership role. Forensics also gives some students the ability to practice leading in a real-world context as officers on their NFL team. Finally, forensics gives students the opportunity to observe and connect with strong leaders – their coaches and other members of the

forensic community. All of these attributes give forensic students an advantage over their peers in assuming leadership roles. Not surprisingly, numerous strong leaders have had forensic training including several members of Congress, Presidents, and even leaders in other fields such as entertainment or social activism. Leaders are important in ensuring that following generations are educated and developed to the utmost standards. Equally important, strong leaders translate into more productivity from students and, later, the community. By training youth for leadership, the National Forensic League and forensic educators can improve their communities immediately and increase the quality of life for Americans in the long term.

Not surprisingly, forensic students are often the most innovative members of society. After learning the process by which a person develops and tests an idea, they can quickly put this skill to work in refining new products and services. In fact, some of the biggest breakthroughs in our society have come from former forensic competitors. The founder of Amazon.com was an NFL member, for example, as was media mogul Ted Turner. Who knows what potential gains currently reside in the minds of current and future NFL members, waiting to revolutionize the way we live. With the requisite gains in education that accompany forensics, it comes as no surprise that students who receive forensic training have a great deal of economic potential for society. Higher levels of education and, perhaps more importantly, critical thinking enable them to be highly productive members of society. While the immediate benefit of a productive job might seem to reside with the job-holder, economists point out that gains among the professional echelons of society are gains for society as a whole. In other words, not only will forensic students benefit, but the beneficiaries of their contributions to society both academically and economically.

The role of the NFL

The past few articles have built a case for forensic education. One of the best ways to support forensics education and ensure its benefits to students, educators, and communities is through the National Forensic League. The NFL can help facilitate forensic education by providing services and support to educators, students, and everyone involved in the process. Among its services are a number of partnership programs between NFL and other notable institutions. Many of these partnerships involve scholarship opportunities for students. Chief among them, the Colleges and Universities of Excellence program connects students with a number of schools that offer scholarship dollars specifically to NFL students who enroll in the program. Other learning opportunities provide competitions in which students can earn additional money for school. Services do not end when a student graduates. Many alumni continue to stay involved with NFL not only to give back, but to take advantage of the Alumni Connection magazine and Alumni support services such as networking opportunities.

Additionally, NFL offers support to its members. Educators may find that the curriculum suggestions in *Rostrum* and

in the online resource pool particularly helpful in bringing forensic education to the classroom. NFL also offers a mentoring program to its members, connecting new coaches with veterans to help them negotiate the process of competing. Students also find support in terms of topic overviews, sample extemp questions, and other practice aids. These resources can enable members to augment their forensic experience. The honors and awards function of NFL may also help speech coaches and students earn the recognition they deserve. Diamond awards for coaches demonstrate coaches' dedication to administrators. Hand-lettered certificates and seals document student achievement. Honor cords are a hallmark of achievement at graduation, and the list goes on. Perhaps Luong said it best when he explained that "Schools that are not NFL members are literally cheating their students of the opportunity to receive credit for their training and accomplishments..." (2000, p. 6).

Final Focus

Forensics powerfully changes everyone who participates. However, forensics is a uniquely valuable activity inasmuch as its benefits extend far beyond its community of participants. Entire groups

of people, some of whom have never seen competitive speech and debate, stand to gain from the power of the activity. By increasing the dedicated activism of a core group of people, serving as a tool for intervention to decrease violence and oppression, and increasing the economic output of an area, forensics tremendously affects our communities. NFL, along with members like you, plays a powerful role in promoting competitive forensics and ensuring that as many students have access to the activity as possible. Supporting forensics is tantamount to supporting the entire village. It is time for us to begin making strategic investments in our communities by supporting the local forensic team.

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